

*It's not **just** school lunch. It's bigger than that.*

How to Hold a Cooking Contest at Your School¹

Why hold a cooking contest?

A cooking contest featuring local food can have a number of benefits for your community.

It can:

- Link your school with local food producers
- Let kids and parents see firsthand how to use and prepare local food
- Support and showcase local farms
- Promote and encourage shopping at the local farmers market

When is the best time to hold a cooking contest?

To ensure that a variety of locally grown food is available, hold your cooking contest in late summer or early fall.

Who should compete in the contest?

Get the kids involved! Having students compete in a friendly food-centered competition will get them excited about healthy cooking and help them to develop culinary skills that they can use at home in the kitchen and later in life.



¹ Adapted from “National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day Checklist” developed by the School Nutrition Association.

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Follow These Steps to Plan Your Cooking Contest

1. Establish a planning committee. Members could include a mix of school administrators, parents, teachers, food service staff, and students.
2. Choose a date for the event. Consider holding it on a weekend or after school so that parents and community members can attend.
3. Get the word out! Put signs up around the school and have sign-up sheets available in homeroom. Get kids excited about it by drawing on the popularity of reality cooking competition shows like *Top Chef*.

Students will prepare a favorite dish at home and then bring it in on the specified date to be judged. Send home a letter or email to parents explaining the rules—parents can play a supporting role in the competition (i.e., helping the student shop for the ingredients) but the dish itself should be prepared by the student!

4. Recruit judges and an announcer for the event. At least one judge should be a student. Include the food service director and the superintendent and/or principal.
5. Invite local growers to come to the event and set up a farmer's market-style table with samples and information about their farm.
6. Develop a poster to advertise the event. Print and distribute posters around the community.
7. Develop a press release and send it out to local papers, TV, radio station, etc. to promote the event.
8. Recruit volunteers for event set up and clean up.
9. Hold a cook's meeting to go over the rules for students. Set any boundaries for cost or type of ingredients. **The focus should be on healthy, local food**—have students keep that in mind and consider setting nutritional guidelines for submissions. Remind students that *they* should be the ones preparing the dish—not their parents!
10. Hold the event! Have judges tally the results after trying the dishes and then give out awards. Be sure all students are rewarded or thanked in some way for their participation. Consider having multiple prize categories that go beyond taste rankings—such as “Best Use of Local Ingredients” or “Best Fruit Dish,” etc.

TEMPLATE FOR PRESS RELEASE TO LOCAL NEWS

For Immediate Release **[SCHOOL LOGO/LETTERHEAD]**
[RELEASE DATE]

Contact:
[NAME/PHONE NUMBER/EMAIL]

[NAME OF SCHOOL] celebrates local food through a cooking competition

[CITY], Iowa—[NAME OF SCHOOL] in [CITY OR COUNTY] will be promoting local growers in the community and healthy eating by holding a student cooking competition on [DATE]. Participating students are asked to prepare a variety of dishes using mostly locally grown, seasonal ingredients at home and then bring them in to be judged by a panel. Featured local growers will have stalls set up at the event with samples for audience members to try.

“[INSERT STATEMENT FROM SCHOOL/FOOD SERVICE/SUPERINTENDENT ABOUT THE VALUE OF LOCAL PRODUCE AND ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO GET EXCITED ABOUT HEALTHY COOKING],” said [NAME OF REPRESENTATIVE, TITLE].

The event is free and open to the community. The event will be held at [LOCATION] from [TIME] to [TIME]. Come show your support for local farmers and stop by the competition!